

The Greatest Soldier Of The War

Testimony and Life Sketch
Of Alvin C. York

BY

REV. G. W. RIDOUT, D. D.

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The Greatest Soldier of the War

Story of
SERGEANT ALVIN YORK

The Christian Soldier who went through
the great War winning the highest honors
ever given a private.

His Testimony and Life Sketch

BY
REV. G. W. RIDOUT, D.D.

First Lieut. and Chaplain O. R. C., U. S. A., who was on three battle-
fronts in the World War.

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THE GREATEST SOLDIER OF THE WAR.

I had read and heard so much of Alvin York the "one man army" as he was known and advertised in 1919 after his return from the great War that I was intensely anxious to meet him. This pleasure became mine when he came to our Asbury College Convention and Commencement in 1923. We both seemed to have known each other for considerable while, as he had been reading *The Pentecostal Herald* and I had read much about him.

It was my privilege then to have a good long talk with Alvin York, and have him tell me himself some of his actual experiences in the great war.

In his "Testimony" given at the Asbury Convention, he said:

"Old things pass away and there are plenty of new things. I am going to try to talk about fifteen or twenty minutes. If the Lord leads me I may talk longer. Since I saw you last year the Lord has kept me every day. I am glad to be here where people believe in real salvation.

"These are perilous times. The devil tries everyone who wants to live for God. If he doesn't tempt us there is something wrong. Victory in the time of temptation means much prayer. When I came home they gave me a farm. For a time it looked as though it

wouldn't be paid for. The devil came around and said I could pay it in a week's time. Then I had no dwelling on it. The devil came around again and said I could pay for it in three days' time. A man wanted me to go into the moving-picture business. He offered me \$150,000 for three days to rehearse battle scenes,—I didn't have to leave home. I tell you that was one of the devil's biggest guns. I remembered one thing,—a night in France,—when I promised God if he would see me through I would never go back on him. He's seen me through. I've made some pretty big promises. I believe if I'd go back on him, he'd blot my name out of the Book of Life.

“When I was going to the army, my mother, same as all the rest of you mothers, didn't want me to go. I remember when I found it was all right to go to war. Praying, it came to me that I should go and should not be harmed. I never was afraid to go after that. Some of you want to hear about my war experiences. I want to forget about the war. Would rather hear the shouts of a newborn soul.

“A sergeant in dugout, when shell landed, —didn't go off, said: ‘York, do you know where I was when that shell landed?’ ‘No.’ ‘In the middle of a prayer.’ One man who was a church member in good standing, said, ‘I wish I had what you've got.’ ‘You can

have it.' A lady reporter in Columbus, Ohio, had an argument about social dancing. Said she danced, went with pastor sometimes. I said that made no difference. She began to cry. That was one time a reporter got news they didn't want.

"There is only one thing I regret about my Christian experience,—that I didn't start earlier. We ought not to tarry too long at regeneration. You remember how people prayed during the war. We need praying now. There are doctrines preached now that ought not to be said in a pulpit. If I were a preacher I'd preach holiness or I wouldn't preach at all. I'm not a preacher, but if the Lord should call me to preach I'd preach or die. Once I was embarrassed. Took a preacher's place once. Called for mourners. Twelve or fifteen young people in front began to cry, but wouldn't come. I looked and there was no altar. The pastor came up and said, 'That's all right, we don't need that sort of thing here. I have a little secret room where I meet those who want to join the church.' I turned it over to him and about fourteen, to my remembrance, joined the church.

"One man said to me, 'You have all the decorations you'll ever get. Now lay aside your religion for a few days and get money to pay your bills. The Bible says, 'Owe no man anything.' I believe in living your life

as you preach. I believe in testimony meetings, and everything that goes to the up-building of God's kingdom."

MARSHALL FOCH DECORATES YORK.

I have seen quite a few of the great soldiers of the War—Pershing, Haig and Foch, but not of these great leaders am I now writing, but of a humble, backwoods mountaineer of Tennessee, who became in a strange and providential way, the greatest soldier of the War—Alvin C. York.

It was not to some great soldier of France or some British hero that Marshal Foch said: "What you did was the greatest thing accomplished by any private soldier of all the armies of Europe." It was to York, the humble Christian soldier of Tennessee, they were addressed, as Foch decorated him with the French Croix de Guerre with palm. Honors were poured upon him as he came back home, but they spoiled him not, because he feared God.

Tennyson sang of a great soldier of his day:

"Let his great example stand
Colossal, seen of every land;
And make the soldier firm, the statesman
pure,
Till in all lands, and through all human story
The path of duty be the way to glory."

When Alvin York gave himself to God sev-

eral years before he went to France, he experienced a case of real salvation from the love and power of sin. Before his conversion he liked to drink and gamble and carouse with the other mountain boys, but in the revival meeting conducted by Rev. Melvin H. Russell in the "Church of Christ," and under holiness preaching, York was both a seeker and a finder. He sought pardon for his sins and the old-time converting power and obtained the same, and became a changed man, through and through. To him, 2 Cor. 5:17, was a great reality; "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

Mr. S. K. Cowan, in his fine book, "Sergeant York and His People," has this to say about his church relationship and the question of going to war:

"When he joined the church he had given himself to it unreservedly. They were holding many meetings and the church was growing. He had become the Second Elder. At the time, too, he was planning for the day when he could marry. The rugged manhood within him had made him refuse to ask exemption from service and danger on the ground that the doctrine of his church opposed war. But his conscience was troubled that he was deliberately on the mission to kill his fellow man. It was these thoughts

that caused his companions to note his moody silences. In behalf of his mother, who, with many mothers of the land, was bravely trying to still her heart with the thought that her son was on an errand of mercy, the pastor of the church in the valley made out the strongest case he could for Alvin's exemption, and sent it to the officers of his regiment.

Lieut. Col. Edward Buxton, Jr., and Maj. E. C. B. Danford, who was then the captain of York's company, sent for him. They explained the conditions under which it were possible, if he chose, to secure exemption. They pointed out the way he could remain in the service of his country and not be among the combat troops. The sincerity, the earnestness of York impressed the officers, and they had not one but a number of talks in which the Scriptures were quoted to show the Savior's teachings "when man seeth the sword come upon the land." They brought out many facts about the war that the Tennessee mountaineer had not known. York did not take the release that lay within his grasp. Instead, he thumbed his Bible in search of passages that justified the use of force.

"One day, before the regiment sailed for France, when York's company was leaving the drill-field, Capt. Danford sent for him. Together they went over many passages of

the Bible which both had found. 'If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight.' They were together several hours. At last York said: 'All right; I'm satisfied.' After that there was no reference to religious objection. From the first he had seen the justice of the war; he now saw the righteousness of it."

Alvin York's war experience began at Camp Gordon, near Atlanta, Ga., which he reached Nov. 16, 1917. His diary has this note in it:

"I was placed in the 21st Training Battalion; then I was called the first morning of my army life to police up in the yard all the old cigarette butts, and I thought that was pretty hard as I didn't smoke. But I did it, just the same." . . . "I stayed there and did squads right and squads left until the first of February, 1918, and then I was sent to Company G, 328th Infantry, 82nd Division."

Another note from his diary ran thus:

"Well, they gave me a gun, and oh my! that old gun was just full of grease and I had to clean that old gun for inspection; so I had a hard time to get that old gun clean, and oh, those were trying hours for a boy like me trying to live for God and do his blessed will. . . . Then the Lord would help me to bear my hard tasks."

Sergeant York's great exploit occurred in the Argonne battlefield, October 8,—a month

or so before the Armistice. I know from personal experience what the Argonne meant. I was with the 38th Regiment of the Third Division in the Argonne almost a month—till October 20th, and no doubt at times the Third Division and the Eighty-second Division touched elbows on that front. Many notable things happened in the Argonne. It was there that the German strength began to topple. It was there the Kaiser began to read the handwriting on the wall, and it was whilst we were there that Bulgaria gave up, then Turkey, next Austria, and Germany soon followed suit.

Unquestionably Alvin C. York's adventure and exploits exceed anything done by any single soldier during the entire World War; and I am convinced that the secret of it all was God was with York. York's story of his exploit and victory he gave as follows:

"On the 7th day of October we lay in some little holes on the roadside all day. That night we went out and stayed a little while and came back to our holes, the shells bursting all around us. I saw men just blown up by the big German shells which were bursting all around us. The order came for us to take Hill 223 and 240 the 8th. So the morning of the 8th, just before daylight, we started for the hill at Chatel Chehery. Before we got there it got light and the Germans sent over a heavy barrage and also gas,

and we put on our gas masks and just pressed right on through those shells and got to the top of Hill 223 to where we were to start over at 6:10 A. M. They were to give us a barrage. The time came and no barrage, and we had to go without one. So we started over the top at 6:10 A. M., and the Germans were putting their machine guns to working all over the hill in front of us and on our left and right. I was in support and I could see my pals getting picked off until it almost looked like there was none left. So 17 of us boys went around on the left flank to see if we could put those guns out of action. When we went around and fell in behind those guns we first saw two Germans with Red Cross bands on their arms. Some one of the boys shot at them and they ran back to our right. We all ran after them, and when we jumped across a little stream of water that was there, there were about 15 or 20 Germans jumped up and threw up their hands and said, 'Comrade.' The one in charge of us boys told us not to shoot, they were going to give up anyway.

"By this time the Germans on the hill were shooting at me. Well I was giving them the best I had. The Germans had got their machine guns turned around. They killed 6 and wounded 3. That just left 8 and then we got into it right. So we had a hard battle for a little while. I got hold of a German major

and he told me if I wouldn't shoot any more of them he would make them quit firing. So I told him all right, if he would do it now. So he blew a little whistle and they quit shooting and came down and gave up. I had about 80 or 90 Germans there. They disarmed and we had another line of Germans to go through to get out. So I called for my men and one answered me from behind a big oak tree and the other men were on my right in the brush. I said, 'Let's get these Germans out of here.' One of my men said, 'It's impossible.' So I said, 'No, let's get them out of here.' This German major said, 'How many have you got?' I said, 'I got a plenty,' and pointed my pistol at him all the time. In this battle I was using a rifle or a 45 Colt automatic pistol. I lined the Germans up in a line of twos and I got between the ones in front and I had the German major before me. So I marched them right straight into those other machine guns, and I got them. When I got back to my Major's P. C., I had 132 prisoners.

"So you can see here in this case of mine where God helped me out. I had been living for God and working in church work sometime before I came to the army. I am a witness to the fact that God did help me out of that hard battle for the bushes were shot off all around me and I never got a scratch. So you can see that God will be with you if you

will only trust him, and I say he did save me."

Mr. Cowan, in "Sergeant York and His People," says:

"In the summer of 1917 when Alvin York was called to war, he was working on the farm for \$25 a month and his midday meal, walking to and from his work. He was helping to support his widowed mother with her family of eleven. When he returned to this country to be mustered out of service he had traveled among the soldiers of France, the guest of the American Expeditionary Force, so the men in the lines could see a man who, single-handed, had captured a battalion of machine guns, and he bore the emblems of the highest military honors conferred for valor by the governments composing the Allies.

"At New York he was taken from the troop-ship when it reached harbor, and the spontaneous welcome given him there and at Washington was not surpassed by the pre-arranged demonstrations for the Nation's distinguished foreign visitors. The streets of those cities were lined with people to await his coming and police patrols made way for him. The flaming red of his hair, his young sunburned, weather-ridged face, with its smile and its strength, the worn service cap and uniform, all marked him to the crowds as the man they sought.

“On the shoulders of members of the New York Stock Exchange he was carried to the floor of the Exchange and business was suspended. When he appeared in the gallery of the House of Representatives at Washington the debate was stopped and the members turned to cheer him. A sergeant in rank, he sat at banquets as the guest of honor with the highest officials of the Army and Navy and the Government on either side. Wherever he went he heard the echo of the valuation which Marshal Foch and General Pershing placed upon his deeds.

“Admiral Albert Gleaves, who commanded the warship convoy for the troop-ships, himself a Tennessean, made a prediction which came true. ‘The guns of Argonne and the batteries of welcome of the East were not to be compared to those to be turned loose in York’s home state.’ The people of Tennessee filled depots, streets and tabernacles to welcome him. Gifts awaited him, which ranged from a four-hundred acre farm raised by public subscriptions by the Rotary Clubs and newspapers, to blooded stock for it, and almost every form of household furnishings that could add to man’s comfort. It took a ware room at Nashville and the courtesies of the barns of the State Fair Association to hold the gifts.

“He was made a Colonel by the Governor of Tennessee, and appointed a member of his

staff. He was elected to honorary membership in many organizations. As far away as Spokane the "Red Headed Club" thought him worthy of their membership 'by virtue of the color of his hair and in recognition of his services to this, our glorious country.'

"He married his sweetheart and the Governor of the State performed the ceremony. The nations of Europe for whom he fought had not forgotten nor had they ceased to honor him. After he had returned to the mountains of Tennessee, another citation came from the French Government for a military award that had been made him, and in a ceremony at the capital of Tennessee the Italian Government conferred upon him the Italian Cross of War.

"There was nothing pretentious about the home in which he was raised. It was but a cabin, yet the chairs, the tables were of seasoned oak, hand-made, solid. The puncheon floor was worn smooth with use and over it was a polished glow from the care of cleanliness, showing purity was there. The walls were papered with newspapers. That was to keep out the winter's wind, but over the windows were curtains of white muslin, and a scarf of it ran the length of the simple board mantel-shelf, and in season the blossom of some flower swayed there. Within the home, no angry words were heard, but often there was laughter and song, and when the form-

ulas for conduct were not followed, even the words of correction were affectionately spoken.

"Everyone in the valley attends church and there are but few who don't go to every service regardless the denomination conducting it. They come on horse and mule-back, on foot, in wagons in the beds of which are chairs for the entire family. In summer many of the men wear their overalls, and all, excepting the young men acting as escorts, come in their shirt-sleeves. Some of the women are in silks, but more of them are in gingham, and many sunbonnets are to be seen."

It was in the little mountain church Alvin York gave himself to God.

A FEW LESSONS FROM ALVIN YORK'S NOTABLE
CAREER.

1. He carried his religion with him in the army. He went through the war with a clean heart, clean hands, clean lips! In the midst of the most wicked environments, by the grace of God, he kept himself pure.

2. He was a true soldier of Jesus Christ as well as of Uncle Sam. Here we are reminded of Wesley's words:

"Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your armour on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through his eternal Son ;

Strong in the Lord of hosts,
And in his mighty power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts
Is more than conqueror."

3. He refused to compromise with his conscience or sell for money his convictions. It was said of him:

"And in the midst of all of these mental-distracting demonstrations Alvin York was put to the test. He was offered a contract that guaranteed him \$75,000 to appear in a moving picture play that would be staged in the Argonne in France and would tell the story of his mountain life. There was another proposition of \$50,000. There were offers of vaudeville and theatrical engagements that ranged up to \$1,000 a week, and totaled many thousands. On these his decision was reached on the instant they were offered. The theater was condemned by the tenets of his church, and all through his youth the ministers of the gospel, whom he had heard, preached against it. The theater in any form was, as he saw it, against the principles of religion to which he had made avowal."

Note: The writer is greatly indebted to Mr. S. K. Cowan's book, "Sergeant York and His People," for much valuable information. Order the book through Pentecostal Publishing Co., \$2.00 postpaid.

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